

# VILLAGE STUDIES PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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VILLAGE STUDIES : PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Hiranmay Dhar

Village studies are a long accepted method of social science research in this country. A significant amount of information have, in fact, been collected through these village studies. This method of research have found favours with the social scientists because of the fact that the village community, together with caste system and Hindu philosophy, provides the basis of the ancient Indian rural society. It, therefore, provides the researchers with a vantage point to review changes in the Indian rural society more accurately. Further, in some sense at least, the village as a unit of investigation enables the investigators to carry through their enquiry in a less heterogenous situation.<sup>1</sup> Impetus for villages studies have come from two other sources. One was the need of the colonial administration. The initial corps of village investigators were, in fact, mainly the British administrators. The other was the anti-imperialist struggles in the later half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century and, also, increasing peasant protests not only against the colonial domination but also against the native oppressors.

The initial researchers to take up village studies were mostly anthropologists, sociologists, and occasional economists.<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning of this century a number of research institutes have also shown keen interests in village studies: e.g. The Punjab Board of Economic Enquiry, the Bengal Board of Economic Enquiry, Visva Bharati Rural Reconstruction Board, the Indian Statistical Institute, etc. The trend continued in the post-Independence period also, perhaps more intensively, both at the national and at the regional level.

At this stage it might be useful to clarify some of the concepts involved in this discussion. Some of these village studies are one man study of one or two villages intensively. By 'village study' one usually refers to these studies. Here the researchers have often adopted the participation-observation method. In recent times efforts have been made to expand the coverage of investigation by taking larger number of villages, which is usually known as 'village surveys'. In this case data are usually collected through investigators.<sup>3</sup>

Both these two types of studies have been subjected to critical review by scholars. A recent workshop on village studies in the Third World pointed out:

- a) "the risk of their conclusions being unduly influenced by the subjective assessment of the individual researcher;
- b) "their making too great a demand on a scarce resources . . . or, in the alternative, giving rise to faulty generalisation by less experienced, less skilled, and less perspective researchers;

- c) "these are often unrepresentative of the universe of rural population in a country, hence, generalisation made from those have limited applicability. For generalisation at regional, state or country level it is necessary to conduct many such studies with a common research design".<sup>4</sup>

These comments raises old issues. One sociologist subjected village studies to equally critical but more substantial observations as early as 1957 : "it is a . . . a common knowledge that villages in British India were inhabited by people of varying economic standard, so that this grouping can not be used as a criterion to segregate the rural households into an economically homogenous units".<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere the same scholar has commented that the unit of investigation in any social science study should be in commensurate with the questions asked.

Corps of sociologists and social scientists have, however, advocated the significance of in-depth study of one or two villages in order to understand the reality of rural society in its totality. In his presidential address to the Social Anthropology Section of the Indian Sociological Conference at Agra on February 8, 1958, S.C. Dube said : "what we lose by not working on an extensive and statistically adequate sample, we more than compensate by acquiring depth and coverage of overt and covert norms in one analysis".<sup>6</sup> In the same vein another author said recently that the village studies can complement such survey studies as Farm Management Studies and National Sample Surveys. The political economists



theory of class should, said the author, be juxtaposed with the landless labourers' view of the landlords, revenue collectors and judge.<sup>7</sup>

One can, however, put the difference between 'village study' and 'village surveys' in a somewhat different perspective. The problematic here is the 'information', 'fact' to be collected. This fact collection is linked to the question asked, which in turn depends on theoretical framework of the fact collection. In his 'Fieldwork Experience : Relieved and Reconsidered - Rural Uttar Pradesh', P.C. Joshi, put this relationship of theory and fact thus : " . . . fact finding without theory has no direction, theory without fact finding has no solidity. The two are therefore complementary and not mutually exclusive".<sup>8</sup> The 'fact' is reality appropriated by a thinking mind which already had an 'imagined concrete' within it. Karl Marx explained this process of appropriation thus :

" . . . if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception of the whole, and I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts, from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations. From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the simplest determinations. From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determination and reality".<sup>9</sup>

In between this 'imagined concrete' and 'a rich totality of many determinations and reality', falls the role of 'village studies' as well as 'village surveys'.

In our case this 'imagined concrete' was the product of radical atmosphere that filled the decade between 1959 and 1969 in West Bengal. The initial year of that period saw the food movement. In terms of popular participation and vehemence, the country has rarely seen such mass movement. The terminal year of that period saw the ebb time of an insurgent decade and also silhouettes of counter-insurgency.

Both in their high tide and in their ebb tide the decade threw up many ideas. Some were old resurrected for the need of the hour. The others were new. Our society was described a 'semi-feudal, semi-colonial'. Only an agrarian revolution can break this feudal hold, it was told. As the rural insurgencies suffered reverses, a few more ideas came up. One was a modified concept of semi-feudal society. Though the semi-feudal elements, are, it is said, quantitatively less important in these societies, they are qualitatively descisive force in determining the character of these societies.<sup>10</sup> The concept of capitalism was also redefined in terms of specific characteristics of the third world economic. The term 'retarded capitalism' was talked about.<sup>11</sup>

The classical writings were also put to new scrutiny in the light of those happenings. Marx's assertion about the inexorable triumph of the capital over pre-capitalist social

forms were reviewed all over again. It was found that the Master was less deterministic about the in-avoidable victory of the capital than his disciples. The later quoted Marx, but thought like Hegel. Lenin too was rediscovered. It was also found that in his The Development of Capitalism in Russia, while Lenin talked about the capital's dominance at a point of time in Russia, he was hardly dogmatic about the historical process of development of capitalism in that country. He was careful enough to point out the prevalence of pre-capitalist elements - bondage, serfdom, land-lordism, etc. - in Russia.

These are the dominant few among numerous ideas that tormented us most when we began our village studies. Between 1978 and 1981 we visited many villages in Bihar. Each village had its specific characteristics (reflected in the next part of our argument in one form or other). But our most consistent inter-action was with five villages scattered over three districts of North Bihar in the period between 1979-81. In one of those villages we spend almost an year. This village forms the main basis of our observations in what follows.

It was in an October evening in 1979 that we reached village R.D.<sup>12</sup> in Rajnagar block in Madhubani district. The district is the poorest in North Bihar. The year 1979 was a drought year in the region. We could see the signs of it in the village. The kharif crop lay destroyed on the field. The village is rocked by labour unrest. The labourers were demanding minimum wages.

One dirt track<sup>13</sup> took us to the house of the biggest landlord, a Maithil Brahmin. In his expansive court yard, we met a number of other landlords, mostly his caste group and a few backward castes, consorting with him. They were seated in Chairs and 'Khatias'. A few steps away were closeting together a few members of labouring castes. This is a familiar sight in Bihar villages.

When we entered the Khaliyas a bunch of inquisitive eyes greeted us. While we introduced ourselves and explained the purpose of our visits, a sizeable crowd gathered around. Inquisitiveness and disbelief and, as we learnt later, hostility was the dominant reaction. Our initial discussions hovered around generalities about the village. The 'babus', and the maliks' answered; the others nodded in approval. The gist of our first days discussions there was that everything is okay for everybody in that village. From there we moved towards Dusadh and Musahar (rat eaters) 'toli'. They spread their tattered quilt on their 'Khatias' for us to seat, lest the rough strings of their 'Khatias' hurt our soft skin and offered us betel nuts,<sup>14</sup> but told us nothing.

Our initial relationship, as revealed through the short account above, was that of hostility and studied indifference. In the fast changing rural society of Bihar today, the rural folks have not changed this ancient attitude of theirs towards outsiders. Earlier they looked upon the outsiders as 'sepahi', 'sahukars' and tax collectors. Now they are seen as revenue officials and 'darogas'.

The landlords initially took us as revenue personnel looking out for excess land and cess. Later their attitude changed as we continued to work in the village. They became better hosts, but continued to be formal while talking. Later we found that they did not give us much information beyond what is available in block offices and other places. Their information tallied remarkably with these sources. This is particularly so for such information as on land, income etc. They were, of course, more amenable respondent for such information as castes, etc. And for such information as cropping pattern, cost of cultivation and the like, they are more willing and reliable than most.

Disbelieve was also the dominant attitude of the labourers towards us initially. Added to that were the labourers scare that they might invite their landowners' wrath if they give us any information about their landlords, particularly about their land, tenancy, etc. We came to know later that during our initial period of stay the landlords were holding regular meetings in the village threatening their labourers to not to 'talk' to us.

With the passage of time the labouring classes changed their attitude to us considerably and became our willing informant not only about themselves - in any case, they were never so reticent about themselves - but also about their landlord - employers, moneylenders, etc. In this period the attitude of the labouring classes was marked by a strange mix between trust and patronisation. We found this relationship

quite useful to our purpose. A few things might be noted here. In RD some of these labourers are more articulated than others. These were usually those who have become politically more informed under the influence of the CPI, who, in fact, acted as our initial go-between these people and ourselves. Further, these labourers talked more freely in the privacy of their hut, in the evening around the fire, if it is winter months, or, during the noon-time siesta when it is summer. In the presence of other villagers their versions tented to be influenced. Also, the mood of these classes changes with the season. For example, if it is 'jeth' - the worst month for these classes in North Bihar - their tongue becomes caustic and critical. In the post harvest period, on the other hand, their attitude mellows down. During this period they tend to resign more to their fate, omnipowerful nature and, also, to the landlords power and patronage. The other thing is that the women folks of these labouring classes are more articulated than the men.

This change in relationship did have important bearing on our investigation. This stage of investigation gave us more information. But even at this stage the gap between us and the village folks persisted, which should be borne in mind clearly to get over possible source of error in information. It was most reflected in the language. Till the last days of the survey, the labouring classes would call us 'hakim', 'malik' and the like. For the landlord a more modern word 'sir' was the frequent way of address. The local dialect also



contributed to this problem. While we know Hindi and tried to pick up as much of the local dialect as possible and the labourers, on their turn, tried to talk in formal Hindi as much as possible, we continue to miss nuances of each others speech. One result of this was our increasing dependence on the more articulated section of the labouring classes. (This is true also about the landlord classes). This might lead to biases in information and even distortion, if one is not careful. The employment of investigator does not solve the problem wholly. In many cases it might even compound it. During our study of the village RD our investigator, a Maithil brahmin with landed interest, constantly tried to influence us with his notion of social relationship in the village.<sup>15</sup> Our feeling on this problem is that it is difficult to do away with the subjective elements completely in such cases. Only way to avoid distortion in such a situation was to become aware of it.

Thus in village proper the major source of information are the villagers. However, the quality of information varies from class to class. The landlords invariably understates the information about land and other assets. On the other hand, they tend to overstate their wage bill. Their information about such other things as conditions of employment etc. are also often at variance with the reality. They usually do not give out any specific information about other landlords unless they have any particular hostility about anyone. Usually they are overly critical about the government. But these landlords

are usually very useful source of information on such things as cropping pattern, irrigation, cost of production, castes, various social customs and the like. Their political attitudes are the attitude of their class usually.

The labouring classes are, on the other hand, more frank about themselves. They have little assets and, therefore, have little to hide. They are a very important source of information about the landlords. We found that the attached labourers gave accurate information about their employers and landlords. This is particularly so if they are politically conscious as indeed they were in village R.D., where they were under the influence of the communists. But we found that they tend to understate their wages and exaggerate information about working hours etc. These tendencies are greater among labourers who are politically influenced. In the interest of accuracy and particularly when the objective is to evaluate changes in the employment conditions of labouring classes, it is necessary to be adequately careful about this source and cross-check the information collected. One more thing may be noted here.

While these labouring classes are critical and more definitive about the economic exploitation of their landlords they are not so definite about their social domination and exploitation. The tradition weigh more heavily on them in this sphere. Those sections of the labouring classes who are politically influenced are not exempted from this.

Besides these two sources, the other major source of information are village teachers, banias (groceer) and also priests. These people constantly interact with various sections of village society and, therefore, come to know more about them. They are also more articulated. But in order to assess their information properly it is essential to know their economic, castes and other links with other sections of village society or even individuals, if possible.

Karmacharis, gramsevaks and the block officials are also good sources of information. In Bihar the information on land and land revenue can be had from records kept by Karmacharis. From the block offices also one can get information on land, tenancies, wage, wage disputes, etc. Also, these officials are good sources of information about social and political situation in villages. But then these sources also need to be assessed carefully. The officials in block offices invariably have pro-landlord tilt because of their caste and class links with them. The information from such source as Gramsevak and Karmachari could also be so tainted. Like the block officials, they too often have social and political links with the landowning communities. Further, ill paid and often without any separate office in the village, (their offices are usually housed in the outhouse of the biggest landlord, where they often stay) these Karmacharis and Gramsevaks, are dependent on the affluent sections of the society for their living and also for their day-to-day functioning.

They, therefore, do not possibly dare check the information given to them by the landlords. However, once befriended, they are excellent source of information.

In our study we collected information on land from (a) Karmacharis record, (b) block office, (c) Karmacharis themselves (separately from their record), (d) attached labourers, (e) other village sources like priests and school teachers. This is supported by random field checking. We found that the official records give (both the records maintained by Karmacharis and the block) one pattern of land distribution and the last three sources give another (Table 1). The difference in the land distribution is most in the third and fourth columns affecting mostly the big peasants and some middle peasants. There is practically no difference in the two distribution pattern given by these two series for the landless and the poor peasants.

Table 1 : Land Distribution (Per cent)

Land owned (acre)	From land records		Estimated	
	house- hold	Land owned	House- hold	Areas owned
Landless labour (0.0 - 0.5)	44	1	44	1
Poor peasant (0.5 - 5.0)	26	9	26	8
Middle peasant (5.0 - 10.0)	25	52	16	17
Rich peasant (10.0 + )	5	38	14	74

Our estimation shows greater skewness in the land distribution than that culled out from the land records. The possibility of biases certainly exists in our estimation. But for reasons given below we think that our estimation is closer to reality. First, the land reform legislations have hardly been implemented in North Bihar. Second, the landlords in North Bihar are well known for under-reporting their land mainly for these legislations restricting the landholding. We found that this tendency is particularly high in the traditional Zamindari areas of North Bihar like Madhubani district. In areas like Patna, which are agriculturally more advanced, and which have not seen big Zamindaris like that in North Bihar, <sup>the landowners</sup> are comparatively less reticent in giving out information on land. Third, and for reasons stated earlier, the land records under-report the land-holding. Last, but not the least, our general observations in the field supports our own estimation. Yet one might say these too can have biases. It is impossible to do away with biases in any such studies. What one needs is to know such biases.

For the study of changing structure of village societies in Bihar, there are good materials in Bihar State Archive and District record-rooms. In the state archives and record-rooms these are mostly in the form of case studies carried out by various levels of colonial administrators before, during and after the settlement operations in their bid to grasp the complex social structure within the village. These reports

are, therefore, not available for every villages. Further, they are scattered over revenue department files 'B' series, revenue proceedings volumes 'A' series and in 'bastas' for the pre-1900 period in the archives. Second, some of these files are still lying in the district record rooms.

On the other hand, the Khatians and village notes cover every village. The latest village Khatians are kept in the collectorate. The Khatians have the information on (a) name, address, father's name, caste and the residence of the owners of land, (b) plot, khasra number, (c) boundary, (d) nature of land, (e) areas, (f) remarks, if any, (g) nature of possession of non-cash rented plot, (h) rayati status. In the pre-independence period these Khatians used to be continuously updated by 'patwaris' and now by Karmachari and sometimes also by block and district officials. But, as we pointed out earlier, these officials have always remained under the dominance of rural gentry. The later have always used this system of record keeping as means to keep their control of land records and through that over land and society. These records needs, therefore, to be used with care and perception.

Village notes also are extremely important source of information about Bihar villages. These notes have been prepared by government officials at the time of settlement, either sitting in the village itself or within three miles of the village sitting in the camp. Usually the pattern is that the notes were made for one or two villages in a locality in



detail. In case of the rest of the villages the reporter noted the specific characteristic (or characteristics) of the village concerned for each item in the form and refer to those major villages for the rest of the information. For population and caste, family and village histories, rent and land rights, markets, soil and irrigation, the information are more complete.<sup>16</sup> Topics less consistency covered are cropping pattern, jajmani system, service tenures, wages, education system etc. Despite these lacunae, these village notes provide invaluable quantitative and qualitative information for village studies in Bihar, particularly for those who subscribe to the concept that the British Raj never had full control of the village and it ruled them with the help of the local gentry.

For us, therefore, the moot point is the questions asked by the investigator which again is posited in the theoretical perspective of the investigator concerned. Once the question is determined one can, go far either 'village study' method or village survey method or both, one complementing, the other. Both 'apprehended concrete' and 'total reality' are concrete reality reflected through the minds - the later more organised than the former - and both, therefore, reflect the values of the person concerned. It follows from this that both the questions asked by the investigators and the information given to him by the person being interviewed arise out of their respective reflections of the reality. Values

and biases are bound to there, therefore. It is necessary that the investigator should be conscious of this. For, the field investigation is in the final analysis a battle of two minds. Realisation of this will not only enable the investigator to pose his question in a manner easily understandable to the interviewee, but it will also enable him to assess the information given to him by his interviewee. This argument can be extended to the data collected from the official sources as well. Not only in their definitions of various concepts used, data collected and forms of their presentation, the official data reflect the views and values of the administration and the state which are the views and values of the class they represent. The researcher needs to be aware of all these.

## NOTES

1. The reference here is to the fact that intra-village contradictions are much less complex and easier to resolve than that of inter-village contradictions. It, therefore, enables the researcher to concentrate on his own problem in relatively homogenous situation. See in this connection, Dasgupta, B., Village Studies in the Third World, Hindustan Publishing Corporation (India), Delhi, 1978.
2. For bibliographical purposes and also review, see (a) Desai, A.R., Rural Sociology in India, Popular Prakashan; (b) Dasgupta, B. (ed.), Village Studies in the Third World, Hindustan Publishing Corporation (India), Delhi, 1978; (c) Mukherjee, R., Sociology of Indian Sociology, Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Bombay, 1979; aldn, (d) Be'teilla, A. and Madan, T.N., Encounter and Experiences - Personal Accounts of Fieldwork, Vikas Publishing House, Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1975; (e) Srinivasan, H.N., Shah, A.M., and Ramaswamy, F.A., The Fieldworker and the Field - Problems and Challenge in Sociological Investigation, Oxford University Press, 1979.
3. For example village monographs by the Census : The National Sample Surveys; the surveys by the Indian Statistical Institute etc. at the national level. At the regional level a large number of village surveys on various issues have been done by institutions like Giri Institute of Development Studies, in Lucknow, A.N.S. Institute of Social Studies in Patna, and the like.
4. Dasgupta, B., op. cit., p. 7.
5. Mukherjee, R.K., 'The Dynamics of a Rural Society', AKADEHIE - VERLAG, Berlin, 1957.
6. Dube, S.C., 'The Study of Indian Village Communities', in Desai, A.R., op. cit., p. 790.
7. Lipton, H., 'Village Studies and Alternative Method of Rural Research', in Dasgupta, B. (ed.), op. cit., pp.11-26.
8. Joshi, P.C., 'Field Work Experiences : Relieved and Reconsidered - Rural Uttar Pradesh', in Srinivas, H.N., et. al., op. cit., p. 74.
9. Marx , Grundriess, The Pelican Marx Library, Penguin Book, p. 100. For a good presentation of this point, see Djurfeldt G., and Lindberg, S., Behind Poverty, Seendina-vian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series, No.21, Curzon Press, 1975.

10. For the most consistent enumeration of this concept see, Ball, S., 'Upamahadesher Samaj O Pradhan Dwandwa', Subarnarekha, Calcutta, 1979.
11. Bagchi, A.K. The Political Economy of Underdevelopment.
12. All specific reference to names of villages, individual etc. are fictitious.
13. Through the village is located less than half a mile from the district road, its only link is a dirt track. During monsoon even this road is breached by flood waters. During that period its only link with the outside world is a circuitous route which is about three kilometers long.
14. It is a typical Maithil manner of honouring guests.
15. When he was employed our thinking was that his caste affiliation might enable him to establish quicker rapport with the land-owning communities of Madhubani. We were only partially correct. While he did establish rapport quickly with the landlords his attitude towards labouring classes was not helpful for us. We faced similar problems in Patna District also where our investigators was a Bhumihaar, which was the dominant land-owning castes in the region.
16. See in this connection, (a) Hagen, J.R., and Yaong, A.A., 'Local Sources for the study of Rural India : The Village Notes of Bihar', in Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol. XIII, No.1, January-March 1976, also see, (b) Jha, H., and Gopal, P., 'Classification of Indian Villages', in Man in India, Vol.62, No.2, June 1982; (c) Gopal, S., Mouzawar Registrar : a new source for the study of rural distress in the nineteenth century Bihar, in Proceedings, Indian Historical Record Commission, Vol.XLIV, New Delhi, Government of India.